

Conversation with MNO speaker Joel Stein

By EMILY FEINSTEIN

About a month before the Houston Federation of Greater Houston holds its 10th annual Men's Night Out event, I had the privilege of interviewing guest speaker, Joel Stein, humor columnist for Time magazine. He indulged me by explaining how he became a writer and what he has in store for the MNO event, set to take place Thursday, March 29, at the Bayou City Event Center. Although he doesn't give himself enough credit, his witty, self-effacing humor is bound to entertain the MNO crowd, no matter the attendees' age or stance on life's issues.

Q: Did you know you always wanted to be a writer?

A: Not always. I was a really shy, anxious kid. I wanted to be an actor. I really liked movies and TV. Late in life – like fifth grade – I figured out that actors didn't get to choose what they say. When I realized that, I decided I didn't want to be an actor, I wanted to be the person who comes up with the words. I wanted to be a playwright for a while. Then, I worked for the school newspaper and that was really fun for me. I'd always figured I'd be a lawyer because, well, I'm Jewish. And, accounting seemed horrible. It wasn't until I had an internship with Newsweek in college that I thought

So, writing seemed like an unusual but feasible route. It wasn't like I was choosing which way to write. I thought it would be fun to do stupid stuff in the school newspaper and see if I could get away with it. That's always been my attitude.

Q: How has your Jewish identity impacted your career? Do you speak for Jewish events often?

I wouldn't say often, but I get asked to do Jewish stuff about as much as I get asked to do Gentile stuff. My Jewish identity informs me in ways that all of your ancestors inform you. There's a whole culture that has pointed me in many specific directions – writing, journalism, humor. I'm not wholly aware of it, but I know it's not accidental. My parents approved of it when I was funny and my parents tried to be funny. I think it's a little more subtle. I don't know exactly how my Jewish identity informs me, but it's definitely who I am.

Q: How did you become fearless about the controversial topics you choose to speak about in public? Do you ever get embarrassed?

A: I get embarrassed, sure. I'm usually smart enough to think through whether something will embarrass me before I say it, but it's the other people who embarrass me – like my wife.

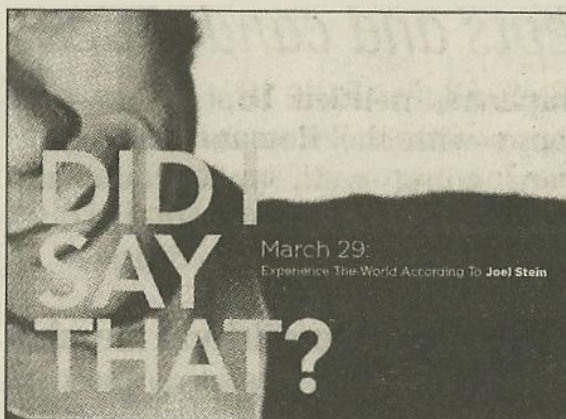
maybe I could actually make a living this way. And, having gone to Stanford and seeing people graduate and get writing jobs, whether it was sitcoms or newspapers, it seemed less impossible.

Q: How did the humor part of it come into play?

A: I always liked reading. I was kind of obsessed with David Letterman in high school. I read a lot of David Barry, and it's the kind of stuff I really enjoyed. It was the kind of stuff I would write for my high school newspaper. And when I got to college, there was a guy named Andrew Berkowitz, who had a humor column on Fridays and people LOVED it. I thought, "It would be cool to be that guy because, I can't play an instrument, I can't play sports." There's no way I can get attention, and I thought, "How am I going to get girls to notice me?"

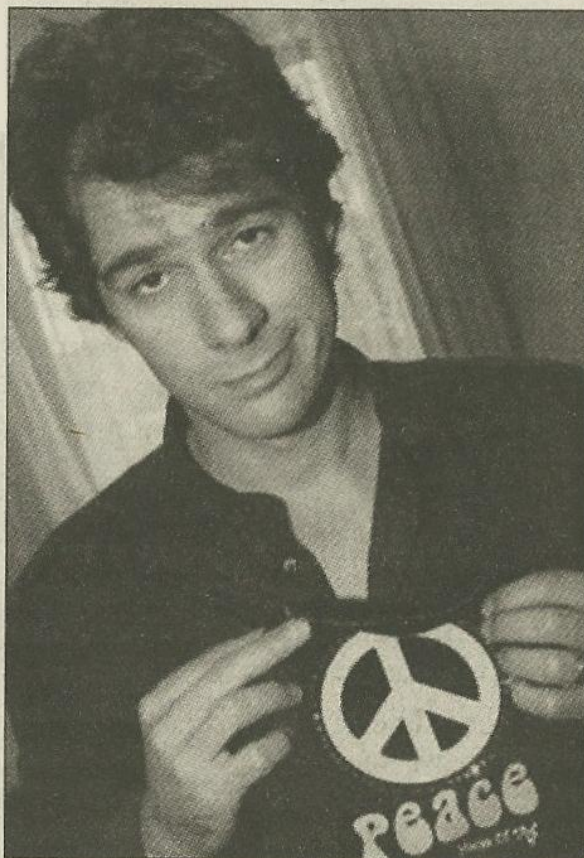
I was so desperate from the beginning to be read. First of all, that's the kind of stuff I like – the honest, real stuff. I think I knew it was crowded out there and I needed to do something to get people to read me. In real life, I'm a lot more mellow and quiet than in my writing voice, so I knew how to amplify and take on topics that I thought were interesting and attention-getting. So, that means some controversy, or least some honesty. There are a lot of things in our lives we don't think of as controversial until other people react. It's just part of being socialized. We learn not to say those things. I've learned that. ... I just question it.

Q: Despite the fact that you like to be sarcastic and talk and write about unpopular subjects, you must have a serious side. Are there certain messages that are



important to you that you like to convey to crowds?

A: There are things I'm interested in, but I don't feel like I have some kind of solution or message or life story that will enrich others. I have nothing to inspire people with. I haven't become wise. I feel like I've met a lot of interesting people and



Joel Stein

learned a lot and have a fair idea of how some of the world works. There are people who are inspirational speakers who make people change their lives. I don't have that skill. At best, I can make them feel something, or see a different part of the world, or hear a different point of view. But no, in reality maybe people get a few laughs. I don't write to give a message to people. I write to tell a story and show a part of the world. You might want to rethink about having me speak.

Q: Without giving away too much (because we want people to come see you in person), what kinds of topics do you plan to speak about at the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston's Men's Night Out?

A: I just wrote this book about me trying to learn how to be a man. The book winds up [with the theme] "a Jew goes South," because I learned how to hunt and fight and fish and camp. I do some things that aren't stereotypically Southern, but I would like to talk about male identity and how it's changing and how the South plays into that. I'm doing it: a) because that's what my book's about and, b) because I'm talking to a bunch of men – in the South – who are Jews. It just seems like a nice fit.

Q: The book you are referring to, which comes out in May, is called "Man Up." What is it about, and why should people read it?

A: I don't know the answer to the second one. That's a very good

question. I do not know why people should read it. I think either you'll learn a lot about these worlds you may not know about – like firefighters and armies and UFC fighters and day traders. For what the book is about: When I found out we were having a son, I freaked out because I can't do guy things, and I thought, "Oh, my boy's going to want to throw a baseball, and watch football, and get in fights, and I can't help him. I don't know how to do any of those things. I'm going to be a horrible father." And then I had an idea for the book. I thought, I'll just go learn all those things and at least have done them a couple of times so I can do them with my son. But, it turns out my son [who now is 2½] is a wimp, so then the book became more about how I can't watch someone else become me. I need to instill all this stuff in him now.

Q: Is there anything else you want the Houston Federation to know?

A: I'm going to be putting a video together so I can show some video of me getting beat up by UFC fighters and armies and stuff like that. Hopefully, there will be an entire audio-visual presentation.

Registration for Men's Night Out on Thursday, March 29, is open. Visit houstonjewish.org/mnregister. For information on sponsorship or to commit to recruitment as a table captain, contact Dora Klaff at 713-729-7000, ext. 314, or dklaff@houstonjewish.org.

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